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ADDRESS

PREPARED FOR THE ANNUAL MEETING

OF THE

New York

Civil-Service Reform Association

(MAY 1, 1889),

BY THE PRESIDENT

GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS

NEW YORK:

PUBLISHED FOR THE

CIVIL-SERVICE REFORM ASSOCIATION

1889.

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ADDRESS TO THE ASSOCIATION

PREPARED BY

GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS, *President*

AND READ BY THE SECRETARY.

The interesting question at the annual meeting of this Association is the condition and prospect of Civil Service Reform under the party change of administration which occurred on the 4th of March. The question was not prominent in the canvass. The Democratic platform was reported in the Convention of the Democratic party by one of the strongest opponents of reform, as we understand it, and declared merely that the Democratic administration had enforced honest Civil-Service Reform. The Republican platform on the other hand contained the most comprehensive and careful declaration upon the Subject ever made in a national Convention and not only pledged the party unreservedly to the policy of reform but pledged it not to break its pledges. The debate of the campaign, however, turned upon the tariff, and reform in the Civil Service was mentioned only to accuse the late administration of its betrayal. After the campaign had opened, President Cleveland, in a special message transmitting to Congress the fourth annual report of the Civil Service Commission, congratulated the country upon "the firm, sensible and practical foundation upon which, this reform now rests." In his letter of acceptance General Harrison strongly and elaborately expressed his approval of reform and, as the party had pledged itself in the platform, he pledged himself in his letter, declaring "It will be, however, my sincere purpose, if elected, to advance the reform."

Two months have now passed, and it will be useful to see how far under the new auspices reform has advanced. It is our

duty in the interest of reform and without party predilections to try performances by principles, and to test the fidelity of the administration to its voluntary pledges. This is to be done by us always, as it has always been done, not for the purpose of making a case for or against a party or an administration, but solely to ascertain the truth. The party of the present administration, raised the standard of reform as distinctly its policy, and as such the President accepted it. The party, therefore, and the friends of reform who sustained it at the polls, are justified in demanding from the Executive a course strictly in accord with the party pledges; and, in pursuing that course the President is equally justified in counting upon the support of his party in the persons of its recognized leaders and official committees, in the general sympathy and approval of its members, and in the uniform and steady encouragement of the party press. Our inquiry, therefore, is, simply, how fully during the first two months of the administration has the President illustrated what he declared to be his sincere purpose of advancing the reform and how strictly has the party held him to an honorable observance of its own voluntary pledge before the election.

The chief obstruction to wholesome reform in the civil service is the usurpation of the appointing power by members of Congress. This power was carefully and purposely withheld from them by the Constitution, except as it required the advice and consent of the Senate to confirm and complete certain appointments of the executive. President Hayes, in his first message, mentioned this usurpation, as the most serious obstacle to reform. President Garfield, when a representative in Congress, alleged that the pressure of Senators and Representatives for patronage obstructed the public business. Mr. Blaine in his review of *Twenty Years in Congress*, says: "no reform in the civil service will be valuable, that does not release members of Congress from the care and embarrassment of appointments." Bills have been introduced to prohibit Congressional interference with the execu-

tive power of appointment, and Senator Edmunds formerly warmly favored such prohibition. But Congress has never seriously considered the subject.

The successful party having proclaimed reform as its policy and Congressional usurpation being the first powerful obstacle that reform encounters, how have members of Congress enforced the party platform? One fact will serve as a reply and an illustration. The Congressional delegation of Vermont in both houses, after duly deliberating upon applications for appointment decided how long the present incumbents should retain their places and who should be appointed to succeed them, thus gravely putting into form a flagrantly unconstitutional abuse of the kind which justly aroused general indignation when the late Postmaster General Vilas practically invited members of Congress to inform him what post office changes they desired. The regard for the reform policy displayed by members of Congress of the administration party is further illustrated by statements made by one of the most devoted organs of that party. Among the applications to the President, was that of an ex-member of Congress to be appointed head of a bureau in which the opportunities of corrupt dealing are enormous, and his request was supported by a hundred members of the late House. Yet the man whose appointment they urged had escaped expulsion from the House for corrupt practices only because a two-thirds vote was required for that purpose and he was then censured by a unanimous vote. He was subsequently shown by an investigation of the House to have acquired a large fraudulent claim through the Treasury, for which the Treasury sent his case to the Criminal Court of the District of Columbia. Another person who had been removed from office by President Grant for improper and presumably personal use of public money, was supported by a state delegation in Congress for a seat in the President's Cabinet.

The strict observance of the spirit and purpose of reform by the party at large is illustrated by the occupation of Washington

by a host of party office seekers and their unceasing assault upon the President for places: and by the instance of a notorious Congressional lobbyist who was pressed for appointment to an important position in the Post Office Department by one of the most prominent and influential of the party clubs. These are not solitary cases; they are examples of the general manner in which members of Congress, and the various party associations and active members of the party prove the sincerity of the platform pledges, and the party resolution to reform the civil service.

What has been the course of the President towards this usurpation of Congress? According to the statement of four representatives from Missouri, the President requested them to serve as a committee on patronage and submit to him a list of persons for appointment to office, without any intimation that there were proper vacancies to be filled, but in obedience to the traditional assumption that with a change of administration there would be a general political change throughout the service. This is the executive commentary upon the declaration of the platform that "spirit and purpose of reform should be observed in all executive appointments," and upon his own declaration that "only the interest of the public service should suggest removals from office." In his inaugural address the President said that, as it was impossible for him to know many of the applicants for office, he must rely upon the information of others. This is undoubtedly necessary. But in every case of application he could ascertain whether there was a vacancy in the office sought or whether there was a reason connected with the honest and efficient conduct of the public service for making a vacancy by removal. Having satisfied himself upon these points he could then have avoided seeking advice of those whose recommendations would be governed by political and personal considerations and not by regard for the service itself. This is almost universally true of the advice of members of Congress, and in making them his chief and practically absolute advisers, the President

merely strengthens the main obstacle to reform. Unfortunately, those whether members of congress or not who are known to have been his advisers in many cases which would test his fidelity to the reform proclaimed by his party have been notorious enemies of reform. He said indeed in his inaugural address that "honorable party service will certainly not be esteemed by me a disqualification for public office." But this remark, fairly interpreted by the party platform, signified that differences of party opinion would not disqualify honest and efficient public officers for retaining their places and that they might be secure against removal. If this was not its purpose, if it was designed to imply that such officers would be replaced by political opponents, it was a mere proclamation of the spoils dogma, and as such a complete abandonment of the principles of reform, of the party platform, and of the executive pledges.

It is in strict conformity with the executive course thus far that it is announced that the Secretary of the Treasury has decided that when a state delegation in Congress has agreed upon "a slate" it shall be adopted without delay. The Secretary of the Interior, also, is reported to have said, that he is "willing and anxious to see the Democrats turned out and their places filled by good Republicans," and he declines to explain the remark. The Commissioner of Pensions in a public speech, in the presence of the Secretary of the Navy, stated with great applause that the President told him that in the conduct of his office "he should remember the limitations of the law and that he must treat the boys liberally."

In the Post-Office Department, the great patronage department of the government, the President's advice to the Commissioner of Pensions has been followed with unfaltering vigor. The fourth class postmasters of whom there are more than 50,000, whose offices under the spoils system are the universally disseminated local centres of party politics are removed as fast as the necessary official details will permit. A cyclone of change rages

in this department. Ability, energy, zeal, fidelity in the service, do not avail against the demand for spoils. The appointment of the first Assistant-Postmaster General who conducts the removals was in itself an earnest that this demand would be heeded, and it is not surprising that the immense and incessant changes in the minor post-offices are stated to have been sometimes made at the rate of one thousand a week, or one in three minutes. It will not be alleged that this general and ceaseless sweep is required by the welfare of the service. It is not denied that it is simple political proscription. One of the strongest of the chief Republican organs says frankly "the administration proposes without cant or false pretence to take the offices without making trumped-up, libellous charges against Democratic office-holders." It was, nevertheless, the solemn declaration of the party of administration that "the spirit and purpose of the reform should be observed in all executive appointments." And the spirit and purpose of the reform contemplate the removal of such officers as fourth-class postmasters solely for reasons connected with the service and excludes from their appointment all political considerations whatever.

While this contemptuous disregard of the pledges of the campaign is apparently universal in the treatment of the fourth-class post-offices, the events connected with the change in the chief Presidential post-office, that in New York, the most conspicuous and important in the country, have commanded universal public attention. This office had become under experienced, efficient and courageous administration, one of the best post-offices in the world. It was the most powerful and conclusive practical argument for civil service reform, and the triumphant illustration of the wisdom of the reform policy proclaimed by the Republican platform. Reform in this office which, by its immense business and enormous revenues, stands at the head of the postal system in the country, could have been maintained and advanced more effectively than in any other way simply by the reappoint-

ment of the postmaster, not because of any vested right in the office but because he was confessedly the fittest person in the country for the duty. In the event of his personal inability, the sole method of maintaining the reform policy, but much more inadequately, was the appointment of a successor of the qualities and convictions of the postmaster, a successor who would be very difficult to discover. In the interest of reform this was the simple and obvious course and no other would have been suggested or considered.

But the President decided that it should not be taken. He decided not to reappoint the postmaster under whom the office had been lifted out of mercenary politics and had become a conclusive vindication of the Republican policy of civil service reform. He decided also not to replace him with a successor of similar training in the postal service, of similar faith in the reformed system, of similar courage to enforce it in defiance of the machine. He appointed a gentleman, who, whatever his excellences of character and his qualifications for public office, was completely and notoriously identified with the political evils and abuses from which the post-office had been emancipated. The President decided that a change should be made and the change was a total surrender to the spoils system. It is now alleged that the reason was the Postmaster's illness. But the change as made shows conclusively that the illness was not the reason but a subsequent pretext, and that had the postmaster been in perfect health he would still have been removed. More than three weeks after the new appointment was made, although the postmaster was no longer living, his successor was still playing a game of party politics at Albany, and it was necessary to appoint a postmaster *ad interim*. The sole course by which the truthfulness of the alleged reason could be made probable would have been the appointment of a successor of the same convictions and purpose.

It is understood that this course was urged upon the Execu-

tive by one of his warm supporters and party friends. The Vice-President, as well as the President, was elected upon a platform of reform. He is a resident of New York and he knew, as all other good citizens knew that the post-office was a citadel of the reform which the platforms demanded. He knew how capable, upright and satisfactory the postmaster was. Was the Vice-President, perhaps the party friend who warmly urged the re-appointment? The senior Senator from New York is also a resident of the city and equally familiar with the facts. He has often and strongly professed his interest in the reform. Was he the urgent friend who to promote reform strenuously advocated the fulfilment of the party pledge and the pledge of the Executive? It should seem that if either of these high officers of the government, with whom upon such subjects the President is known to have consulted, had made a simple and earnest statement of the facts, and insisted that the reform which had been the party policy and was already triumphant in the post-office should not be abandoned, the surrender might at least have been stayed.

It is pleaded that reform may not be arrested because a large part of the subordinate places in the office are included in the classified service. But if the principles of the reformed service are still to prevail, in the office, why was not its control entrusted to a friend of reform? It is true that in his inaugural address the President announced that every public officer, "will be expected to enforce the civil service law fully and without evasion." But how can the President, himself the chief of public officers, keep his own oath to enforce that law except by confiding its execution to friends and not to foes? How can the declared reform policy of the party of administration be carried out except by those who believe in it? In a review of the course of the late President Cleveland in the early months of his administration Senator Hoar of Massachusetts said truly, "you cannot serve reform and the Democratic party." Not less truly may it be said

of the course thus far of President Harrison, you cannot serve reform and the Republican machine.

President Lincoln was elected upon a platform of the exclusion of slavery from the territories. If he had appointed a slaveholder to be Governor of a territory, he would have been justly accounted recreant to the principles and policy of his party. President Harrison by his action in regard to the New York post-office has brought into public contempt one of the fundamental declarations of the platform of his party. If his object had been to prostitute the public service in order to strengthen a party machine, he could have done nothing more effective. His course in this instance is a signal illustration of the abuse which his party platform condemns and which civil service reform that the platform adopts as a party policy, is intended to correct.

The circumstances of the death of Mr. Pearson, immediately following his removal were profoundly pathetic. His fatal illness was undoubtedly stimulated and aggravated by his heroic struggle to do his official duty against tremendous odds. His position and course honestly supported by his superior officers and encouraged in other offices would have been fatal to the venal politics and the mercenary prostitution of patronage which are the foundations of the machine. In fighting him the spoils system was fighting for its life. His official destruction was therefore the common cause of the machine in both parties. He stood firmly for the honest service of the people, his opponents, for their own selfish power. Unstained by those who meant to force him to retire, dogged by their emissaries seeking plausible pretexts for his removal, he resolved, if life were granted, not to yield, and for many a month, he silently fought the good fight while his life surely ebbed away. Those who without the responsibility of office advocate reform upon what they believe to be sound and simple principles may be easily condemned as sentimentalists and theorists. But the man who in a great office, amid every kind of malicious obstruction and active hostility, with unquailing steadfastness and the sacri-

fice of health and life, demonstrates the practical efficiency of those principles, furnishes the living and resistless argument by which great causes at last prevail. Dying at his post such a man is as truly a martyr to his country as the hero who falls in battle. We shall be indeed unworthy Americans, if a character so pure, a life so spotless, and a public service so great, do not consecrate us more devotedly than ever to the cause for which he died.

"It will be my sincere purpose if elected," said the President in accepting his nomination "to advance the reform." The word reform as used by the President and in the platform of his party has a definite meaning which was of course distinctly understood by him and by those who made the platform. It was not limited to the faithful execution of the civil service reform law, but was expressly declared to include in its spirit all appointments. It means the exclusion of politics from the great multitude of places in the civil service. It means dismissal from such places, only for reasons connected with the welfare of the service. It means that the service is not to be refilled with political partisans merely because of a party change of administration. This was the reform which the party adopted and the President pledged himself to advance. The annals of two months from which I have selected characteristic illustrations show how it has advanced thus far. We have certainly never shown a disposition to judge any Executive unfairly or without reasonable regard to the difficulties of the situation, as our comments upon the administrations of Presidents Arthur and Cleveland plainly attest. It is undeniable that immediate and total reform of an evil system is not to be expected and that serious mistakes and inconsistencies, unwise appointments and equally unwise removals are compatible with an honest desire and purpose of reform. But flagrant and deliberate violations of sound principles of the public service are not to be excused or palliated by the plea that they are mistakes and inconsistencies. Errors are pardonable but wrong acts consciously performed are not errors: they are offences for which the offender is justly responsible.

If the President regards himself as a trustee of his party he is trustee of a party which adopted civil service reform as its policy and declared that its spirit and purpose should be observed in all executive appointments. Yet not in one conspicuous instance, so far as I know, has the President observed that spirit and purpose, or ordered them to be observed. I do not mean of course that he has appointed no honest or capable officers but that he has not respected the principle that such officers in places which are not political, should not be removed for political reasons; nor do I know a single member of the Cabinet, a single Senator or Representative in Congress, or, with very few honorable exceptions like Mr. Theodore Roosevelt of New York, a single recognized local leader of the dominant party, who has publicly insisted that the declared policy of the party on this subject shall be respected. The administration senators and representatives who lingered in Washington after the adjournment of Congress did not remain to take care that the party policy of reform should be enforced, but, as office brokers and peddlers of patronage, to secure places for political workers, to procure party advantages, and to foster personal ambitions. They were not engaged in promoting the public welfare by excluding politics from the public service where politics are impertinent, but in tightening and strengthening by patronage a party machine. Meanwhile the party clubs, Leagues and Committees, all over the Union, have shown by their conduct the confident expectation that no regard would be paid by the administration to the platform promises and pledges under which in the campaign the support of intelligent citizens friendly to reform was solicited. With very few honorable exceptions the press of the party has demanded the usual political proscription in the civil service, or it has acquiesced in the practical contempt of the declared party policy, or it has truculently defended the plainest neglect of principle as real reform. The chief party organ in the country frankly defended the overthrow of reform in the New York Post-office by the assertion that, "It is certain that party

organization cannot be maintained by ignoring party leaders," which is the old and fundamental plea for the spoils system.

The only signs of party interest in the party declarations that I have observed are first the statement that a representative from Massachusetts has presented a petition of the merchants of Boston asking that the Collector of that port may serve out his term; a proceeding which assumes, and not unnaturally, that the Collector for political reasons would be summarily dismissed. Let that little candle throw its beams as far as possible. Second: It is reported from Washington, although there is no other notification, that the President does not propose the removal of satisfactory officers until the expiration of their terms. Should this rumor prove to be correct, and some such officers are not yet removed, such a course would be so far a distinct measure of reform, as it would assure the continuance of some officers throughout almost the term of the administration. It would destroy the precedent of what is called a clean sweep and demonstrate that a general party change of incumbents is necessary neither to good service nor to party organization. This, however, is but the rumor of an intention. We are concerned, now, with the actual conduct of the executive, and I doubt if any candid observer of that conduct would declare that at last a party has come into control of the administration which, according to its solemn assertion that it would not violate its pledges, has thus far proved that it means honestly to advance Civil-Service Reform.

In what I have said I have tested the administration not only by the principles of reform but by the specific declarations and pledges of the party which it represents. Our Association is strictly non-partisan and I venture to say on its behalf that, whatever may be the personal political sympathies of its members, they would all have equally rejoiced if it could be said truthfully that the declarations of the dominant party were in process of faithful fulfilment. It would be a vital error, however, to suppose that the situation indicates profound public indifference to reform.

It shows only that we have constantly asserted that neither party as a party is a civil-service reform party. Their declarations of interest, however, are tributes to a powerful public sentiment which has already exacted from both parties certain great and definite gains for reform. That sentiment is constantly increasing and constantly weakening the force of party ties. The dangers to free institutions which the Republican platform declared to lurk in the power of official patronage, become only the more evident when the public pledges of a party are deliberately condemned by its administration. But the public intelligence and conscience to which those pledges appeal are not unobservant of practical neglect of them. The political degradation and corruption, the ruin of the proper function of party in a republic, the destruction of the self-respect of public employees, the vast and increasing venality of elections, constitute the dangers which are denounced by the Republican platform. The more plainly these dangers are seen and the character of the system revealed from which they chiefly spring, the more thoroughly aroused will be the public mind, and the more certain and complete will be the remedy.*

* Since this address was delivered the President by the appointment of Mr. Theodore Roosevelt of New York and Mr. Hugh S. Thompson of South Carolina, and the retention of Mr. Charles Lyman of Connecticut, as Civil Service Commissioners, has so far redeemed the pledges of the Republican platform and of his own letter of acceptance. The excellence of this act is heartily acknowledged by the sincerest friends of reform, who would be the first to hail frankly and unreservedly, a course consistent with its spirit and promise.

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